
During a trip to Greece in 1982, I visited the monastery of Barlaam in the Meteora. In the recently renovated refectory is housed the museum which contains the treasures which belong to this monastery, founded in 1517 on a site occupied since the 14th century. In the museum are a number of manuscripts of Gospels and other Scripture portions of still earlier date. I pored over these for some time, and had the greatest difficulty in deciphering any of the writing.

It would have been a great help if I had studied Bruce M. Metzger’s book ‘Manuscripts of the Greek Bible’ subtitled ‘An Introduction to Palaeography’. Having read the book I now have a much clearer idea of how ancient manuscripts were produced, and of how to read them. Moreover, I have no need to return to the Meteora to see the manuscripts, as the book provides many examples of writing from the second century B.C. to the fifteenth century A.D. These examples are reproduced as plates, and the second half of the book consists entirely of these, accompanied by explanatory and historical notes.

The first half of the book is a highly readable account of the main areas covered by the science of palaeography. While the main interest is in biblical manuscripts, there is much information here that is of equal interest to students of the Classics.

Metzger begins with a brief history of palaeography, and the modern techniques employed in research. This is followed by a chapter on the origins and development of the Greek alphabet, accompanied by clear and helpful diagrams. Chapter 3 deals with pronunciation, accents and writing conventions. Chapter 4 is a fascinating account of the making of ancient books in which, with admirable conciseness, we are given information on ancient writing materials, and clear explanations of such terms as papyrus, parchment, volumen, quire, codex and palimpsest.

Perhaps the most valuable chapter is that on the transcribing of Greek manuscripts. Here will be found much fascinating information on scribes and how they worked; the nature of the errors made; styles of handwriting; the development of miniscule manuscripts. There is a very helpful diagram illustrating the development of the Greek alphabet from the 9th century B.C. through the classical period and on to the uncial, cursives, and miniscules, to the period of the development of the printing press in about the middle of the fifteenth century A.D. Other diagrams illustrate the development of minuscule writing and its conventions. These are very clear and helpful for anyone faced with reading an ancient text.

The final section of the text is devoted to the special features of biblical
manuscripts, together with information about early lectionaries and commentaries. There are three appendices — the first on dating a Greek manuscript; the second on collating a Greek manuscript; the third is on the statistics relating to the manuscripts of the various types.

Part 2 of the book contains 45 plates of manuscripts of both Old Testament (Septuagint) and New Testament texts. The examples are chosen because each illustrates some special feature, palaeographic, historical or textual. The plates are correlated to the text in Part I. The arrangement is chronological, from second century B.C. to fifteenth century A.D., and the developments in script can be clearly seen. Each plate is accompanied by a note giving the date of the manuscript, its origin, its present whereabouts, its history and its special features which provided the reason for its inclusion. Each text is then transcribed in a corrected version complete with accents, breathings and punctuation.

This book is packed with information given in a concise and clear format. The main text is not too long and is always most readable — the author’s enthusiasm and sense of humour are often apparent. There are detailed footnotes which provide all the help that the more serious reader would require. There is a select bibliography, and four indexes are provided — of scripture passages, of manuscripts relating to number and location, and of general palaeographic terms.

The book provides a valuable tool for all biblical students, but its width of interest will make it useful to all who are concerned with the writing of Greek from the period when writing reappears in the emergence from the ‘Dark Age’ down to the invention of the printing press over 2000 years later.

Calum Gilmour


This second collection of eighteen pieces consists of English translations of articles which have appeared in Hebrew in three Israeli periodicals since 1975 — Cathedra (5), Quadmoniot (2), Tarbiz (1), or in recent books (5), together with three responses to one of the articles and two further articles, which apparently have not previously been published. The collection is